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On their own turf: taking the library into the field



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Archaeology and environment students may be reluctant to spend time in the library when they could be digging holes and wading through streams – but what happens when the librarian goes out into the field with them, asks **Sarah George**.

I'M SURE every academic librarian knows the students I'm talking about, the ones who lurk at the back of the class (if they show at all) engaging as little as possible with library sessions. Not because they're poor students but because they consider library instruction to be peripheral to what they do. This article relates an experiment in what happens when the library tries to get closer to the core.

In the case of archaeologists and environment students, that core is fieldwork. Every hour they spend in the library cuts into their time digging holes, wading through streams and generally engaging in cold, muddy fun. As a lapsed field archaeologist myself, I have some sympathy for this point of view. So when I was asked to join the second year environment students on fieldwork due to short staffing in the department, I didn't take much persuading.

Initially I hoped that I would be able to demonstrate relevant library resources in the evening sessions, but it transpired that our hotel's idea of 'conference facilities' did not include an internet connection or a projector. So I downgraded my hopes to making personal connections with this particular cohort of students, rather than for any major breakthrough in relating to their subject.

Reading the landscape

But on the first evening, looking out across the Mediterranean (did I mention the fieldwork was in Mallorca?), one of the lecturers started talking about reading the landscape as a palimpsest. A palimpsest is a document which has been over-written, the lecturer's point being that the landscape was the result of aeons of successive processes rather than a single event, and that the students

Hard at work: fostering student/librarian relationships.



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needed to learn to 'read' it. My ears pricked up at this point: this was an unexpected incursion deep into library territory. Reading the landscape, identifying clues as to its formation and history, these were skills that could be related to information searching.

Later in the week, I asked if I could run part of one of the evening sessions. When I announced that I was going to teach the class to read I was met with predictable guffaws. These subsided somewhat when I went on to explain that they should apply their skills at 'reading a landscape' to assessing information sources: not just the overt text but also the implicit messages such as who the author is, when it was written, the intended audience and the style of writing. I got them to think about whether all publications in their field of environmental science were open and transparent, whether all of the answers to the questions they were asking were black and white, whether they were going to be told exactly which sources to use when they were doing their dissertations.

I urged them to invest their information searching with the same spirit of enquiry that was being fostered by their fieldwork. Although response was muted (it was rather past the time that the students considered as beer o'clock), several came to ask me questions the next day.

Not bounded by walls


So did it work? The cohort I took on fieldwork were notably more willing to contact



Students hard at work 'reading the landscape' on Santa Ponça beach.

me with enquiries and, ironically, as I was trying to show them how the library was not bounded by its physical walls, more frequent users of the library. As one student remarked, whilst showing round a friend from a different course, it's easier to feel at home in a place when you've breakfasted with the staff!

And would I do it again? The fieldwork, certainly. I'm in negotiations to take part

in fieldwork again this summer. Whether I should expand this ethos into the other areas I support is a more challenging question. My other areas are chemistry and forensics, for whom the core is laboratory work. When I was last in a laboratory I caused the evacuation of an entire department with an injudiciously placed exploding cow (but that's a different story). So possibly I should stick to fieldwork for the present. 

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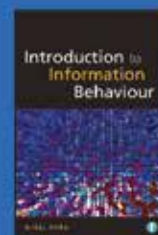
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